



The Coolest Experience of My Life – Conducting My Master Thesis in Rio de Janeiro

Before departure

Ever since I was a kid, I have always wanted to visit Brazil. The vibrant culture has had a great appeal on me, with the football culture, the vibrant music, the dancing, and the natural scenery. Moreover, I am quite passionate about global challenges, and in particular, the challenges of income inequality. Brazil has long been one of the most unequal countries in the world, with mind-boggling photographs going viral of slum-like residential areas right next to luxurious ones¹. Throughout my five years at KTH, I've enjoyed taking every opportunity for international experiences and exploring the world. As the arrival of writing my master's thesis came closer, the idea of doing it in Brazil arose. I had previously been part of a project on social entrepreneurship in the townships of South Africa. The favelas in Brazil are equivalent to the townships in South Africa, notoriously suffering from high levels of poverty and in many ways being socially excluded in the country. Therefore, I decided that I want to keep exploring entrepreneurship in these settings. The main challenge now was finding a suitable area to write within and finding a contact person in the country. After days of brainstorming, discussing with friends, and emailing different persons of interest, I eventually identified a research area of interest that seemed feasible. I reached out to a friend who had volunteered for an organization in Brazil. She provided me with the contact information of a man who would become my contact person for my research. Further preparations included getting a vaccine shot against yellow fever and finding accommodation for the first period of my stay.



¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/nov/29/sao-paulo-injustice-tuca-vieira-inequality-photograph-paraisopolis>

Upon arrival

As the plane prepared to depart for Rio de Janeiro, I reached into my pocket to switch my phone to airplane mode. As I am doing that, I see that my contact person in Brazil has sent me a voice message. Just as the internet connection begins to fade, I manage to swiftly download the message. He tells me that he had just quit his job, that we are not going to meet anymore, and that “this has been going on for a while now”. The situation unfolded like a scene from a movie, leaving me seated on a plane to the other side of the world, now without knowing a single person in the country. How would I proceed with my master's thesis now? And why did my contact person not tell me he is quitting before? Amidst a whirlwind of thoughts, I could only lean back and embrace what is ahead, uncertain of how this journey was to unfold.

Financials

Living in Rio de Janeiro was generally less expensive than Sweden. My three main expenses were accommodation, food, and transportation. Lunch at a local spot was around 45-70 SEK, and that would make you really full. International restaurants were slightly more expensive, around 100-150 SEK. To keep my costs down I mostly ate at the local spots, which in general offered really good food. Cooking was not an option as I did not want to spend time on that and figured that the money saved by cooking would equal a rather small hourly saving. Moreover, I happen to be quite a terrible cook and preferred exploring Brazilian cuisine.

One of the highlights of living in Rio de Janeiro was how easily and efficiently I could get around the city. The city offers a bike rental system for only 60 SEK per month. I relied on these bikes to travel everywhere. If I ever needed a longer ride, I would use either the public metro system or taxi applications. The metro system was 13 SEK a ride and though not very extensive, it would take you to all places of relevance quite easily. At night when the metro did not operate I would use taxi applications, which cost around 2 SEK per minute. This made transportation in the city hassle-free and quite budget-friendly.



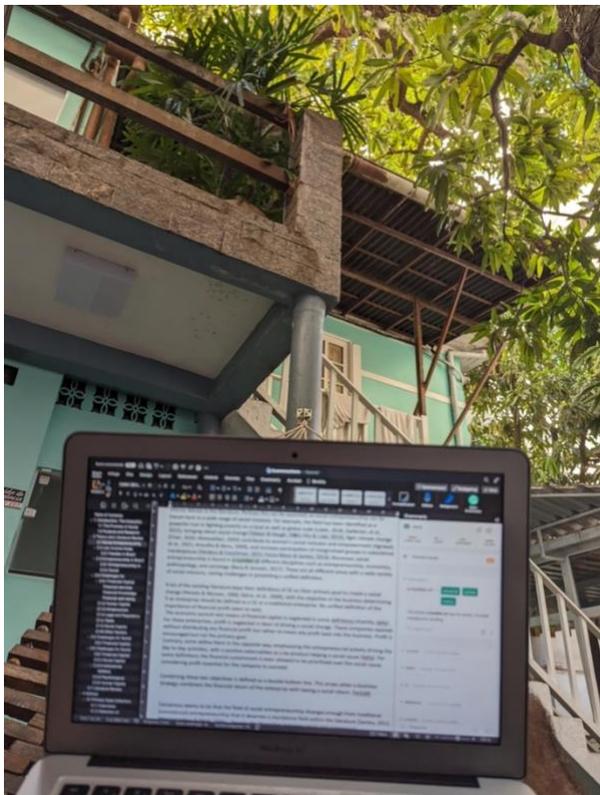
Accommodation

I stayed at hostels during my entire stay, which is a bit unconventional. Before my trip, I had low expectations of hostels since I had never stayed in one before. Looking back at it, I can genuinely say that choosing hostels over having my own place was one of the best decisions I made and made my experience so much better. I had the opportunity of meeting so many wonderful people and had so much fun socializing. The alternative of renting a flat and staying by myself didn't have the same

appeal to me. At the hostels, you would meet people from all over the world and would develop quite close relationships with the people living with you as you live together for a short period of time, and share new experiences in a foreign setting.

Of course, staying at hostels had some negative sides to it but nothing too bad. You would have the occasional guy with no common sense slamming the door multiple times at 7 in the morning with uncanny oblivion to the others sleeping in the room. Mid-way through my trip I discovered the magic of earplugs, which made a huge difference. Plus, if the hostel was good, you would have a curtain to your bed which would make a huge difference to your privacy. Usually, you were around 6 people sharing a room, and everyone always had a locker to store belongings in. I stayed at different locations during my stay and liked Ipanema the best. It was right next to the beach with a variety of restaurants and supermarkets nearby. Though commonly regarded as a more expensive area, I was able to get around fairly cheaply. Once you spend a week or more there you eventually get a better hang of the area and will be able to find those local gems, beyond the tourist traps.

The cost for a night at a hostel usually ranged from 150 to 200 SEK, though prices skyrocketed during carnival season in February. I paid an average of 700 SEK per night for two weeks during the carnival at a really good location in the heart of Ipanema. During this time, I stayed in a dorm room with 12 people, crammed into a space of about 20 sqm. Interestingly enough, I sometimes found that the rooms with more people felt more spacious.



Project

My master's thesis aimed to investigate the challenges for social entrepreneurs in the favelas. This was done by conducting semi-structured interviews. After my contact person quit, I had to resolve the situation by finding another one. I eventually got in contact with a person of interest that led me to another person, and so on. Through this method of snowball sampling, I eventually managed to collect data for my thesis to investigate my research question and complete my research in a way that I was satisfied with. I learned a lot during my stay in the country, interviewed some very interesting people, and had my perspective broadened on many things in life.

Country

Rio de Janeiro is now by far my favourite place on earth. There were so many things that made the city stand out for me. Coming from the cold climate of Sweden, I highly value good weather and beautiful beaches. One thing that really stood out to me is the fact that even though the city is so beautiful and quite popular among tourists, it still manages to keep a local authenticity that I am yet to experience in other parts of the world. Take any of the other popular beach cities in the world, say Bali, Dubai, or Barcelona, perhaps three of the world's most popular beach cities. The problem with these places is that when you go to the beach, you are just surrounded by other English-speaking tourists, with speakers playing the same music as back in Sweden, and with little to no contact with the local population. What I really liked about Rio is that the place is just a culture-filled sponge ready to soak you in. On a Sunday you would have 200,000 Cariocas (locals from Rio) on the beach pumping favela funk, playing football, and just enjoying life. Moreover, the whole beach is considered a public space and open to all, with no overpriced beach clubs or fancy restaurants occupying parts of the beach. I enjoyed that as it brought a sense of equality in it that is not easily found elsewhere.



Brazil has a bad reputation for being unsafe for tourists, which I feel is not justified. Coming to Brazil, having read some about it online and listening to others, I expected to get a gun pointed at my head at any time. Once I got accepted to do my thesis in Brazil, I remember lying on the bed in my apartment in Stockholm, digesting the fact that I was really going to Brazil. So I went on YouTube and typed in "Rio de Janeiro" to see what I was getting myself into, and the first thing that showed up was a video with a thumbnail of a guy bleeding from his head, titled "just got robbed on the beach" in capital letters. I just laid there on my bed thinking "What have I got myself into". The first days in the country for me were quite funny looking back, at it as I did not dare to take out my phone in public, expecting it to get stolen if anyone sees it. After a week of spending time around the city, hanging out with others, and just exploring the vibe of the city, I realized that the threat is quite not as apparent as I initially thought it to be. I and neither of the many people I met during my stay experienced such a violent threat. The only thing that would happen was that people would get their phones pick-pocketed on a night out amongst a heavy crowd, without them noticing. Unfortunately, this would happen quite often. I just stored my phone in a neat money bag around my waist tucked in under my shirt and never felt unsafe at any moment. I did not get the feeling that the general thief would go out of their way to

steal, but rather act on opportunity. The only precaution I took was therefore to not store my phone in my pocket in public in a way that it would be easily accessible to a thief. Having said that, I am aware of the male privilege I carry in this world, making me less prone to experience safety issues. Some people might have different experiences.



Sustainability²

The challenges of inequality are prevalent on a global scale and are not exclusive to Brazil. In a recent report, inequality is reported to be increasing in almost every country in the world. Research has shown the negative impact that inequality has on societies and a wide range of health and societal issues, such as increased levels of crime and violence, reduced life expectancy, and reduced general well-being among the population. Entrepreneurship is a driving force behind the economy in the favelas despite resources being constrained by a lack of capital, education, and supportive institutions, among other factors. This has been further researched in recent years, with scholars arguing entrepreneurship is a critical means of poverty alleviation in low-income settings. This was also highlighted in a report from the United Nations on the importance of MSMEs, concluding that these enterprises are “the economic lifeblood of communities around the world” and highlighting their importance in fighting poverty and safeguarding the livelihoods of the disadvantaged. Women and minority-owned businesses have been shown to face further social and cultural barriers as well, leading to further inequality concerns within the area. The field of entrepreneurship will therefore play a vital role in achieving several of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals such as SDG 10, reducing inequalities; SDG 1, eradicating extreme poverty; and SDG 4, access to quality education for all.

Moreover, as mentioned previously, I managed to travel sustainably by using the extensive rental biking system that is provided by the city. This was almost always the most efficient way of traveling and is something that I believe more cities should look into, as it not only reduces CO₂ emissions but also reduces the traffic in the city and improves the general health of the population.

² Please see my thesis for references used in this section. “Social Entrepreneurship in the Favelas of Brazil: Challenges and Constraints” by Mohammed Rafid.

Leisure and social activities

Rio de Janeiro is beautifully located along the world's longest beach coastline and has some of the most beautiful beaches in the world. On a free day without work, a typical day for me would consist of waking up at 9 and going to the local café to enjoy an Acai and a meat sandwich for breakfast. Then I would go to the beach to relax, perhaps read, or enjoy some footvolley. By lunch, I would bike down to one of my favorite local spots and enjoy a classical Brazilian plate with chicken filet, beans, rice, and fries. Later I would spend the afternoon exploring the city, with friends or alone, go to the outdoor gym by the beach, and perhaps catch the sunset at one of the great sunset spots in the city. By night there were always some local parties outdoors where people would bring instruments and just enjoy themselves. Usually in Sweden, I'm not a big fan of going out, as you need to stand in a long line to barely get into a dark room with really loud music, not being able to communicate properly with anyone. In Brazil, I really enjoyed it though, as the experience was quite the opposite. The parties were usually outdoors and organized by some locals, with live music, flip-flops and shorts, and a more relaxed vibe.

